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Hondurans in 'Sweatshops' See Opportunity

By LARRY ROHTER

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras, July 13— Each morning, the workers spill off the buses and past the guards at the front gates of the industrial parks here, rushing to punch the clock before the 7:30 start of their workday.

Outside, anxious onlookers are always waiting, hoping for a chance at least to fill out a job application that will allow them to become part of that throng.

With wages that start at less than 40 cents an hour, the apparel plants here offer little by American standards. But many of the people who work in them, having come from jobs that pay even less and offer no benefits or security, see employment here as the surest road to a better life.

"In the countryside, a peon is a peon for all of his life," said Yensy Melendez, 29, a father of two and former farm worker who migrated seven years ago to this bustling city of 350,000 near Honduras's Caribbean coast and now has a factory job. "Here, it's not perfect, but at least you have a chance to improve your situation."

What residents of a rich country like the United States see as exploitation can seem a rare opportunity to residents of a poor country like Honduras, where the per capita income is \$600 a year and unemployment is 40 percent. Such conflicts of standards and perceptions have become increasingly common as the global economy grows more intertwined, and have set off a heated debate about international norms of conduct and responsibility.

The recent controversy involving the television personality Kathie Lee Gifford and a line of clothing made here that bears her name provides a widely publicized case in point.

To critics in the United States, the apparel assembly plants here, known in Spanish as maquiladoras, are merely "monstrous sweatshops of the New World Order," to use the phrase of the National Labor Committee, the New York-based group that originally accused Mrs. Gifford of turning a blind eye to Hondurans working for "slave wages."

The National Labor Committee, a nonprofit group, is largely financed by foundations but also receives money from labor unions in the United States.

After the attacks on her, Mrs. Gifford has now endorsed efforts to monitor and improve conditions in apparel plants around the world. But the debate over what constitutes adequate wages, what minimum working conditions should be required and at what age it becomes permissible for minors to work continues here and in other developing countries that have eagerly welcomed assembly plants as a source of employment for their poor.

Whether workers think they are better off in the assembly plants than elsewhere is not the real issue, argues Charles Kernaghan, executive director of the National Labor Committee. Employers, he said, have a moral obligation to pay not merely what the market will bear, but a wage they know to be just.

Low Wage Rates Draw Criticism

"The salaries being paid in a place like Honduras amount to less than 1 percent of the price of the garment in the United States," he said. "That's a crime." Companies could easily double their employees' wages, he added, and "it would be nothing."

But many of the people who work here and are most familiar with conditions in the plants argue that the situation in Honduras, at least, where about one-fifth of the clothing workers are unionized, is far more complicated than portrayed in the American debate over "sweatshops."

To make any kind of sweeping generalization is dangerous and misleading, many said during interviews here with more than 75 apparel workers and union leaders and visits to half a dozen plants, including the one that made clothes for the Gifford line.

Many here say critics from the north are more interested in protecting jobs in the United States than in improving the lot of Honduran workers.

Yes, workers and employers here say, some companies verbally abuse their workers on a regular basis, insist on compulsory overtime, impose unreachable production quotas or dismiss employees who become pregnant in order not to have to pay maternity benefits.

But other plants supply a subsidized lunch and free medical care to employees, are modern and air-conditioned, have agreed to union shops and generally respect workers' rights.

"You will find varying conditions and outlooks here," said Israel Salinas, president of the Federation of Independent Workers of Honduras, one of three rival labor groups seeking to organize the approximately 75,000 employees who work in the estimated 160 assembly plants in this country. "It all depends on whom you talk to and where you go."

A Worker's Escape From Rural Poverty

The story told by one apparel worker, Eber Orellana Vasquez, is not unusual. He is one of some 450 employees at the King Star Garment assembly plant just south of here, a Taiwanese-owned company that produces beach shirts, shorts and other sportswear for the United States market.

At 26 he is a veteran of three years as an apparel worker and a strong supporter of the union that represents the employees in their dealings with the company.

"This has been an enormous advance for me," Mr. Orellana said, "and I give thanks to the maquila for it. My monthly income is seven times what I made in the countryside, and I've gained 30 pounds since I started working here."

Before he became an apparel worker here, Mr. Orellana explained, he worked for a decade on a dairy ranch, milking and herding cows and living in a rented shack. "My only possession there was a bicycle," he said, so small was his salary.

Now, thanks to his job as a quality control checker, he owns a house of his own, "made of brick with a zinc roof," he noted proudly, in contrast to the flimsy wood and thatch roof dwellings that are the norm in the countryside, and has access to electricity and water.

He has been able to bring his wife and a younger brother, now 17, from the ranch and find them jobs in the plant.

"Every time I go to visit the ranch, everyone wants to come back with me," Mr. Orellana said. "The work there is very hard, exhausting. You get up at 1 o'clock in the morning to start your chores, and the bosses are always mean. If you drink too much milk, they will fire you."

Company Accused Of Rights Abuses

The clothes for the Kathie Lee Gifford line were produced by the Global Fashion plant at the South Korean-run Galaxy Industrial Park just north of town, which has been singled out by human rights advocates here and abroad as being especially harsh and abusive to workers.

In recent testimony to Congress, a former employee at the factory, Wendy Diaz, 15, said she had been forced to work up to 74 hours a week by supervisors who regularly screamed at, hit and sexually harassed employees.

"We knew that factory wasn't the greatest," Mr. Kernaghan said in a telephone interview from New York. "We knew that conditions were pretty rough there, that people were being fired for trying to organize, that it was not a good place, not near to being among the better factories in Honduras."

Wal-Mart, which markets Mrs. Gifford's line of clothes, has no production contracts at the moment with Global Fashion. But it continues to have clothing made under contract at numerous other apparel plants in Honduras, and is being pressed by the National Labor Committee to consent to an independent monitoring program.

In an interview at the plant, Paul Kim, president of Global Fashion, acknowledged that his company required compulsory

overtime of its employees, had a high employee turnover rate and might demand more effort of workers than some other companies here.

But he denied Miss Diaz's charge of systematic abuse, and described the regimen here as a form of tough love that works for the good of all concerned.

"Korea used to be a poor country, like Honduras," Mr. Kim said, speaking in Korean through a Spanish-language interpreter, "but we have had a lot of development because we worked very hard. The more you work, the more you earn. That's what Central America needs if it is going to become prosperous."

An Industrial Boom Brings Labor Shortage

A decade ago, Honduras had virtually no assembly plants, and poor people had few options. Now, the factories have absorbed so many workers that they are creating labor shortages that have helped drive up wages for workers in other sectors, including agriculture, forestry, mining, fishing and even domestic work, traditionally the worst paid and most abusive.

"It used to be easy to get a nanny or a maid, but not now," said Jesus Canahuati, whose family owns an industrial park and several assembly plants here. "Everybody wants to work in the maquilas, because they represent an opportunity for a better life."

Within the apparel assembly industry itself, workers and employers agree, explosive growth has also encouraged the labor force to be on the move, always looking for the best offer. When workers do not like conditions where they are, both sides say, they often move to other jobs offering production incentives and increased benefits that in some cases double their base wage.

"If you don't pay more than the legal minimum, you don't get any employees," said Perry Keene, acting manager of Certified Apparel Services of Honduras, a plant here that makes infants' wear for department stores in the United States. "They will all go to other people, because it's a competitive labor market."

Another sharp difference of perspective surrounds the issue of teen-agers working in the assembly plants. The National Labor Committee and other critics in the United States contend that the practice, widespread here, is "destroying a whole generation of young women" and have called for American apparel concerns to stop doing business with all suppliers who hire children.

Honduran Unions Defend Child Labor

But all three of the leading labor federations here, including unions that have worked closely with the National Labor Committee in denouncing abuses of workers, disagree with that position.

Instead, acting in accordance with the demands of members whose own children are already working, they want the Honduran Government to enforce regulations that are already on the books.

Under Honduran law, adolescents between the ages of 14 and 16 can be employed for up to six hours a day. To do so, they must first obtain the permission of their parents, which is usually readily granted, and of the Labor Ministry, also easily obtained in a country in which education for the majority of the population ends at sixth grade.

"This country is not the United States," said Evangelina Argueta, a labor organizer in Choloma, a suburb just north of here with a large concentration of industrial parks. "Very few Honduran mothers can afford the luxury of feeding children until they are 18 years old without putting them to work."

Nevertheless, responding to complaints from the United States and to the fears of blacklisting that have arisen as a result, the Honduran Maquiladora Association says its members have now stopped hiring any workers under 16. Union leaders and workers say factory owners have also been reviewing their personnel records and dismissing all employees who are minors.

But that does not mean the dismissed youngsters are returning to school. On the contrary, management and labor agree that most of the children have instead sought new jobs outside the assembly sector that are lower paying and more physically demanding or are buying fake documents in an effort to sneak their way back into the apparel plants.

Campaign Brings Unintended Result

Mr. Kernaghan acknowledged that his group's effort to end child labor had produced unanticipated consequences. "Obviously this is not what we wanted to happen," he said.

He added that his group had discussed with Honduran factory owners an arrangement that would permit the 14- to 16-year-olds already employed to keep their jobs but shift future hiring toward adults.

"It's a tragic situation that needs to be resolved," he added. When asked how that should be done, he replied, "I may not be the right person to answer that kind of question, since I'm not an economist."

Many older workers who themselves began working at a young age assert that the American campaign may actually be hurting the very people it is intended to help.

Rene Javier Robertson, for example, left school at 13 to work as a fare collector on a bus "because with four kids besides me, my family needed me to work" and opportunities for teen-agers were limited.

"In 11 years on that job, I worked 14 hours a day, seven days a week, never got a day's vacation, didn't get paid when I was sick, and had to content myself with whatever wage the bus driver felt like paying me at the end of the day," said Mr. Robertson, who got a job on the assembly line three years ago and is now 27. "I was a slave, with no rights."

Teen-agers working at assembly plants "are a million times better off in here than out there on the street, because the maquila represents progress," Mr. Robertson added. "The work here isn't heavy, there are many benefits, and they have to respect your rights. I wish the maquila had existed when I started to work, because I could have avoided a lot of suffering."

Photos: Employees sewed garments at the Global Fashion plant in Honduras, which made clothes for the Kathie Lee Gifford line. The factory has been singled out by human rights advocates as being especially harsh and abusive to workers. Delmy Suyapa Pineda, a worker at the Global Fashion clothing factory. (Photographs by Associated Press)